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THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE¹

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At the outset I may as well admit that I am in an argumentative mood. Not that I know anything whatever about the laws of argument. "How to Know the Fallacies" is not my *forte*; least of all, how to know my own fallacies. I make this statement at the beginning; it would be superfluous at the end. But, I repeat, I am in an argumentative mood; not for the sake of argument, but because I am sincerely interested in the subject assigned to me, and because I hear not infrequently nowadays the question: "Why study the history of English literature at all?"

I suppose the implied objection is partly due to our modern love of informal education, sometimes called the "natural method," or what not, that at which "Scholasticus" was grumbling in that same essay to which I just referred, "How to Know the Fallacies." Said he: "The intellectual world is topsy-turvy. What is to be expected of a generation that learns to write before it learns to read, and learns to read before it learns to spell—or rather which never learns to spell?"

Having done away with the spelling-book and the reading-book and the copy-book, they would also discard the history of literature, would these disciples of some informal "natural method," originating with, I haven't the slightest idea whom—Froebel, or Pestalozzi, or Aristotle himself, for all I know; for that is the most disconcerting thing about these advanced educators: they tell you that you are an old fogy, and when you object that new things are not always true things, they inform you that what they advocate is as old as Aristotle.

The objection is also due in part, perhaps, to the lack of the ideal method and the ideal textbook for teaching the history of the literature. We in this room are familiar with the bewildering multiplication of

¹Read at the Conference of the Secondary Schools of Vermont with the University of Vermont, January 11-12, 1906.

textbooks. It would seem as if, when the enterprising publisher can think of nothing else to do, he dictates a letter asking some teacher to prepare a new history of English literature. Thus the publisher keeps time from hanging heavy on his hands.

And the teachers thus addressed respond because they realize that the ideal book has not yet been written. They feel the need of a combination of Taine and Ten Brink; something as sprightly as Taine, as scholarly as Ten Brink. But somehow the new products do not fill the want; they are frequently as unreliable as Taine and as dull as Ten Brink—a combination not desired.

We all know how that ideal textbook should blend the qualities, how it would reveal literature in its relationship to the national life in all that the great term implies—the political, social, philosophic, and ecclesiastical character and movement of the nation; in its relationship to foreign literatures, making known the mutual reactions which have taken place when nation encountered nation in war or conquest or commerce; in its relationship to earlier literatures, foreign and national, at those periods of awakening when out of the dead past a spirit was resurrected which breathed new life into new literature. It should be a book which would maintain the balance between cool impersonal record and the surplusage of the author's sentiment, more appropriate to an essay; which would have less the tone of a government report which characterizes Stopford Brooke, and less of the whim and caprice which characterize—you may fill in the name for yourselves; a book which would discriminate between the individual will and talent of the poet, and the taste and habit of his age, distinguishing that which belonged to his time and that which belonged to himself; a book that would preserve the proportions, not neglecting the minor writers and overemphasizing the great, nor on the other hand failing to indicate the relative elevations; but which would present the region in its true topography from sea-level to mountain-top; the gradation from the low-lying plains and morasses of pedantry through the gently rising ground of the minor poets who did little of lasting value in their own right, but did much to show the way to others, these leading to the pleasant foothills with occasional airs from higher regions, up to the long varied ranges, which lead in turn to the great pre-eminent peak—that peak which looks solitary in the

distance and in ignorance, but on approach is seen after all to be but the great eminence to which there was gradual ascent.

It is all best illustrated, of course, by that literature which followed the early sixteenth-century awakening in England: first Skelton, Hawes, and Barclay; then Wyatt and Surrey, Sackville and Norton, Udall and Gascoigne; then Lodge, Lyly, Puttenham, Sidney, Peele, and Greene; after that, Marlowe, Spenser, Bacon, Raleigh, Chapman—great heights, leading to Shakespeare,

Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,
Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling place.

Something like this, I suppose, is the ideal book which we all have in mind. Of course, any of us could write it, "if he had a mind to," as the man said of Shakespeare's plays. But somehow it does not get written.

But I contend that the lack of the ideal book is not a proper excuse for throwing the whole thing overboard. I don't suppose that the ideal shoe has been invented. Certainly, I have never found it. But to say that we will therefore stop walking would be literally as well as figuratively "a lame and impotent conclusion."

My first contention, therefore, in this question of the teaching of the history of English literature is that we should teach it.

It is proper to differentiate the study of literature into æsthetic and historical study; the impression and the facts; the reaction on the reader which is joy, and the knowledge which is power.

We should certainly agree that the first term is the more important. It is better that a student should appreciate a poem than that he should know it in its historic setting. Mr. Birrell in his latest volume of essays (*In the Name of the Bodleian*) tells of a young woman, applicant for a position of assistant librarian at Bristol, who, answering certain test questions, averred that Rider Haggard wrote *Idylls of the King*; Southey, *Mill on the Floss*; and Mark Twain, *Modern Painters*. Now, I am ready to concede that, except for purposes of librarianship, it is better that this young woman should love the *Idylls of the King* in all their splendor of romance, allegory, imagination, and poetry, and think that Rider Haggard wrote them, than that she should have known that they were written by a man named Tennyson, and see in

them nothing but a sequence of words differing from a novel by the "Duchess" only in that their lines do not extend clear across the page. But I have a suspicion that a young woman who appreciates the *Idylls of the King* will trouble herself to find out who really did write them.

To strike a little deeper into this matter. It is better that a reader should feel and respond to the melodies and harmonies of the *Prometheus Unbound*, and think that it was written by a British poet named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who lived in the age of Queen Anne, than that he should know that the poem was written by Shelley who was a British poet flourishing in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and see nothing in the poem but rhyme and words. But the two things are compatible, and the reader's appreciation becomes fuller and richer when he realizes that the poem is not only an individual's inspiration, but also the effect of some world-wide influences, of French Revolutionism, and Greek idealism revived and unconsciously mingled with German mysticism; in short, that a new civilization as well as a new poet was manifested in that exalted drama. Is the beauty less for knowing those things? Surely not.

At basis of the supposed antinomy of literature and the history of literature is an objection which once may have been valid, but I am sure was long since turned into a species of cant—the objection that accumulations of facts train only the memory and do not really educate; that to know something is fatal to feeling anything.

Doubtless too much was made of genealogy, marriages, and dates in the history of literature as she was taught in the old brave days of facts, the dunce-cap, and reverence for Solomon's injunction about sparing the rod. But to say that we must therefore do away with facts altogether is to say that we should drift into mere impressionism and profitless teaching. For, after all, we may as well remember that we cannot teach appreciation. When we have done our utmost, the results upon the student's taste are as God wills.

Very clever travesties have been written of the current methods of teaching literature, and we teachers are not so bereft of humor that we cannot appreciate these "satiric wipes." Even better than our critics we know that English classics have been over-edited, just as the habit of writing literary histories has been overdone.

A little while ago I quoted with approval from clever Mr. Crothers;

with somewhat less approval I quote from him again, this time from *The Enjoyment of Poetry*:

Suppose these lines from *Paradise Lost* be taken for study:

Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks
In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades
High over-arched embower, or scattered sedge
Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed
Hath vexed the Red Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew
Busiris and his Memphian chivalry.

“What an opportunity this presents to the schoolmaster!” Mr. Crothers exclaims.

“Come now,” he cries with pedagogic glee, “answer me a few questions: Where is Vallombrosa? What is the character of its autumnal foliage? Bound Etruria. What is sedge? Explain the myth of Orion. Point out the constellation on the map of the heavens. Where is the Red Sea? Who was Busiris? By what other name was he known? Who were the Memphian chivalry?” Here is material for exhaustive research in geography, ancient and modern history, botany, astronomy, meteorology, chronology, and archaeology. The industrious student may get almost as much information out of *Paradise Lost* as from one of those handy compilations of useful knowledge which are sold on the railway cars for twenty-five cents. As for the poetry of Milton, that is another matter.

So far Mr. Crothers. Now, undoubtedly, to forget Milton’s poetry, while we run after strange gods of botany, astronomy, archaeology, and so forth, is to teach badly. But it is also teaching badly to leave the student ignorant of the plain meaning of the lines. For appreciation of these lines it is not necessary to know where Vallombrosa is; but it is necessary to know *what* it is, that it is a place, and not something to eat, like ambrosia. And of Busiris it is at least desirable that we should know that he was a man, and not a city or a book. You will recall Mrs. Carlyle’s state of mind after reading Browning’s *Sordello*, and her confusion as to whether Sordello was a man or a city or a book.

“As for the poetry of Milton, that is another matter,” says Mr. Crothers. It is indeed another matter. It is a matter, like appreciation of color or spiritual regeneration, which can be only assisted from the outside, which cannot be compelled.

To say that a teacher is suggestive is to say very little, for the teacher who does not suggest does not teach. He is a two-legged catalogue. But he who only suggests is doing but a portion of his work.

I am grateful to the man who will suggest to me the beauty and charm of Mount Mansfield; but if I want to go there, I will thank him to show me the road. That is a very plain and practical thing. And teaching is a very plain and practical thing.

I am reminded of a passage in the autobiography of Charles Godfrey Leland. In Philadelphia he had two successive schoolmasters—Bronson Alcott, then a very young man, and a plain honest Quaker, named Jacob. Alcott emitted strange sounds, unintelligible to the children, which Leland in later years realized were transcendentalism, while the textbooks lay neglected. Honest Jacob taught with the textbook and a hickory gad. Doubtless neither was the ideal method. But when Leland looked back on those times after sixty years, he realized that from Alcott he had learned nothing, while from Jacob he had learned his Latin grammar. Those were results. And even in these days of advanced pedagogy we want results.

Now—and this is my whole thesis—our teaching, to be effective, must be definite. Let us give just as much interpretation and æsthetic appreciation as we can, but let us also give the facts.

But our facts must be interpreted facts, significant facts. George Ade—and I make no apology for quoting from him on this grave occasion; from him we can learn several useful lessons; first, perhaps, to avoid his vocabulary; but also certain positive lessons, as to be direct and pithy in what we say; to know what we want to say and to say it; above all, from him we can learn a deal of common-sense, not less sensible because humorous—George Ade relates this of a woman's club in a small town: "After the club had been running for six months, it was beginning to be strong on quotations and dates. The members knew that Mrs. Browning was the wife of Mr. Browning, that Milton had trouble with his eyes, and that Lord Byron wasn't all that he should have been, to say the least." He adds that "in the meantime the jeweler's wife had designed a club badge." But that is incidental, and not the point to which I wished to call attention.

Those facts which the ladies of the club learned were facts, and facts which it is just as well to know. But apparently they were not set forth with significance. The trouble was that the ladies had simply extended their habits of gossip to the dead and gone.

Literary history is not gossip. That is a fundamental point for us

to lay hold upon. The chief event in the career of Shelley was not that he twice eloped, and deserted his first wife under sensational circumstances. A much more significant event for English literature was Shelley's discovery of a rather dry and, in some respects, a very foolish book called *Political Justice*, written by William Godwin, Esq. William Godwin was an unromantic figure, and his daughter Mary was a most romantic figure. Under circumstances romantic to the verge of melodrama, Mary Godwin became Shelley's second wife, and William Godwin became only that most unromantic thing, a father-in-law. But to literature, as it was manifested in Shelley, William Godwin was a far more important influence than Mary. In fact, the desertion and elopement, and the whole miserable tragic business, were a result of Godwinism (*William Godwinism*) and Shelley's application of Godwinism to life; while *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hellas*, *Julian and Maddalo*, and much else most characteristic and glorious in Shelley's poetry, were a result of Shelley's application of Godwinism to literature.

Godwinism, in turn, was a result of French Revolutionism, and French Revolutionism was to some extent a result of Rousseauism. Thus we get a glimpse of the coherence and continuity of literature, that overleaps national boundaries and the "salt, estranging seas," and establishes its habitation by the laws of the universe, the laws of evolution. And thus we perceive that the day when Shelley discovered Godwin's *Political Justice* was, in a way, a literary epoch, and that literary history is not gossip. Here are facts, but they are significant facts.

Even poor, abused dates have their significance, if we view them aright. They who regard Culture (spelled with a capital *C*) as such a fragile thing that it will fall to pieces if blown upon by the strong winds of fact, tell us that dates are unimportant. They are unimportant if they are learned by rote and never applied. But the same is true of the multiplication table.

As an isolated fact it may not be important to remember that William Wordsworth was born in 1770. But when we remember that 1770 was just nineteen years before the Bastille fell; that at nineteen a youth is impressionable; that the French Revolution, and the problems to which it gave rise, directed the current of Wordsworth's poetry;

that in later years he was resistive to large political ideas, was unimpressionable to a degree remarkable among poets, was narrow in his prejudices, stiff in his opinions; remembering these things, I say, we perceive that it was important that Wordsworth was born in time to be only nineteen years old when this great event came to pass. He himself, remarking on this event, said:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be *young* was very heaven!

Had he been old, the imperturbable Wordsworth of the later years, we surmise that much which we now know to be among the greatest things of English poetry would in all human probability have remained among the eternal silences. Yes, it was important that Wordsworth was born when he would be malleable under this great formative influence; it was important that he was born in 1770.

Again, it is significant that in the decade 1770-80 these children were born: William Wordsworth, Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Walter Savage Landor, Charles Lamb, Jane Austen, Thomas Campbell, William Hazlitt, and Thomas Moore; and that in the years 1800-12 were born Thomas Babington Macaulay, John Henry Newman, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Elizabeth Barrett, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, William Makepeace Thackeray, Robert Browning, and Charles Dickens.

An astronomer told me recently that there has been much mistaken awe about the so-called regularity in the motions of the planets. It seems that this old earth of ours is really wabbling on her axis and jolting in her orbit in a very irregular and eccentric manner, being sometimes quite four thousand miles out of her course—so my astronomical friend informed me. Then he added: “There is undoubtedly a law about all this, but only the Lord himself knows what that law is.”

Equally, I should say, does there seem to be some recognizable but inexplicable law about the appearances and observations of human genius, about those irregular and unpredicted milky ways in literary history, like those astonishing eighteen years between 1598 and 1616, when the whole British heavens burst into sudden splendor unparalleled in the history of the world’s literature; or those less dazzling,

but not less phenomenal, ten years between 1740 and 1750, when so much of the eighteenth-century native literature broke into light; or those ten years between 1760 and 1770, when the new romantic literature darted its meteoric fires across the skies; or—and to alter the overworked metaphor—that decade, 1770–80, and those twelve years, 1800–1812, when those two amazing broods of song-fledglings began to stir in their nests.

To explain these things is impossible; to know them is desirable. Such knowledge seems quite as legitimate as the dates of Magna Charta, the Reform Bill, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The fact is that a criticism of the study of the history of English literature is a criticism of the study of history itself—in the larger sense of political and social history. Are we so bold as to do that? Are we so fatuous? Do not many schoolboys suppose that the chief facts about King Alfred and George Washington are that the first let some cakes burn, and the second owned a hatchet which he used indiscreetly? But is this an argument for studying history less? Surely it is an argument for studying it more. An objector might say that the parallel is forced, that the time for knowing Washington and Alfred personally has passed. They are dead. They can be known only in the records—in history; whereas literature is alive, is its own history.

To this I would reply that, if the student will read all English and American literature, from *Beowulf* to Browning, it may possibly be unnecessary to study a formal history of the literature. But we need hardly argue that assumption. We know—how painfully we know!—that when we have devoted our entire lives to this study, we have in our reading selected only a few jewels from the vast treasure-house. Then what shall the poor student do in a dozen crowded years of school and college, with all the sciences and languages, as well as literatures, to be assimilated?

But even to this preposterous assumption I prefixed a provisional adverb, “possibly.” Even to read it all is not necessarily to know the connections; is not necessarily to perceive how what preceded led to what followed; how what is now, derives its strength from what went before; how English literature stands related to the literatures of

Greece, Rome, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, the frozen but prolific North, the spiced and visionary Orient.

This study must be interpretative. To be interpretative it must be systematic. To be systematic it must, in the right sense of the word, be *formal*.

The only rational objection to the history of literature is that it takes the time which might be occupied with reading the literature itself. But is it not worth while to start right? Shall we know nothing of the history of philosophy because we want to read Plato? Can we not do both? If we have not time for both, we have not time to be educated.

We have time to learn and time to teach both the history of the literature and some vital portion of the literature itself.

The only proper question at issue is that of proportion. Certainly we should all agree that the lion's share should go to the literature itself. That is the more important part. But the history has its importance, too; not a separate importance, but contributory; for—and this is my whole contention—we study the history of the literature in order that we may the better understand, and therefore appreciate, the literature itself.

About the proportions I would not dogmatize. But my own experience (including some college-preparatory teaching and a good deal of college teaching) leads me to believe that the wisest plan is not to attempt a systematic study of the history of the literature in the sub-collegiate years, but to postpone it to the second year of the college course. To adapt the history to the immature minds of girls and boys almost inevitably leads to a mere enumeration of names and dates, and to that personal gossip about authors which it is so desirable to avoid. But it is perfectly possible in the study of a specific masterpiece to give it its historical setting and to suggest its relationship to the great trend of English literary history.

The books prescribed for college-entrance examinations were not selected with a view to chronology, but rather to illustrate literary types and to acquaint young people with a few masterworks of literature. In the study of *Julius Cæsar*, for instance, the main stress should undoubtedly be laid upon the poetry and dramatic quality of the play, upon the character delineation and the great human motives

which inspire the action, the psychological and ethical qualities. But it is also feasible and desirable to suggest the coherent part which this play has in English dramatic history, to show how this crystallized dramatic perfection grew out of the loose-jointed chronicle drama. In Milton's *Lycidas*, *Comus*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, while indicating the inherent qualities of the elegy, the masque, and the lyric, while emphasizing the charm of loftiest inspiration and faultless workmanship, it is possible to show something of that belated Elizabethanism and premature Puritanism which give Milton his characteristic place in our race-literature. So with Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with America*, where literary history and political history meet, and British literature and American literature prepare for the parting of the ways.

In the books required for mere reading the treatment must be cursory; but, incidental to the æsthetic view of them, it is quite possible to display each against its historic background. There is Shakespeare again, this time a comedy and a tragedy, representing at once the type and the highest achievement of that English drama which was so long in the molding, and mingled of such diverse alloys. There is Addison, the epitome of the age of Queen Anne, with its attenuated faculty for thinking and its perfected faculty for expression. There are Coleridge and Scott, in poetry and prose fiction, unfolding the perfect flower of romanticism, no longer in the bud, but fully blown; for German airs have breathed upon it. There are George Eliot and Tennyson, revealing the attainments in prose and verse of a conscious literary art, as it was conceived in the Victorian age, when great writers paid equal tribute to a large humanitarianism and an equally large artistic creed. And finally there are Irving and Lowell, as representatives of the two great epochs of our American literature.

Thus the student in his preparatory days will have got some ideas about some of the most important eras of our literature, though these will not be correlated until he is in college. His freshman year in college is best occupied, I believe, in carrying on in a somewhat more advanced way his study of individual English classics as models of expression, and the cultivation of his own powers of expression by more or less formal rhetorical exercises.

It is in the sophomore year that I would prescribe the great outline

course of the whole range of English literature, in relationship to its origins, national and foreign, to be accompanied by typical readings, illustrative of the several epochs. This is the year of the student's orientation, connecting the things he has learned in previous years, and preparing him, by means of this general survey, for the more philosophic and intensive study of special periods and special authors in his junior and senior years.

Such a study of literature—I mean that combining history and interpretation—is, I believe, secondary to no study yet devised, not even to political history itself. If political history is larger in its scope, literary history is more human. In the rise and fall of political institutions we have a more titanic, but not a more mysterious, spectacle than the rise and fall of human thought, and the art which directs the expression of thought. The history of philosophy is the history of thought in the abstract; the history of literature is the history of thought in the concrete. Locke and Kant make theories; Pope and Wordsworth apply them. Through the centuries we behold the solemn ebb and flow of this tide of thought—obeying a law not of man's devising, nor yet of man's explaining, now gathering itself into a great tidal wave, with Shakespeare on the crest, and now

Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

It is a subject worthy of our study and our teaching. Very few of us are fitted by nature and training to handle it in an ideal way. But we can assist and advance those committed to our governance, so that, generation by generation, scholars may be trained up who will approach nearer to the goal.

In this discourse I have naturally insisted on the historic view, the communal view. But, in conclusion, I would utter a word of warning. Let us avoid emphasizing world-forces and national forces to the exclusion of that which, after all, is the greatest force in letters—the force of the individual. Let us beware of pushing a theory to its destruction, as does too often the brilliant Taine. Let us remember in patience that there is no theory to which all the facts will conform; that the only indestructible theory about the human race is that it is too complex and too inconsistent to be incorporated in any theory;

that, though men are subject to the influences of their age—appallingly subject—they are not automata; that there is free will as well as fate in this world of ours; and that, though a man instinctively conforms to his time, he also goes beyond his time, if he be possessed of great original genius; and that is what the men we study were—men of great original genius.

When William Shakespeare sat down to write a drama, he was William Shakespeare of the Globe Theater, late of the town of Stratford, as well as heir-apparent to the "spacious times of great Elizabeth." His Elizabethan English citizenship, implying almost jingoistic patriotism and familiarity with the chronicle drama, will explain, at least in part his play of *King Henry the Fifth*. But only his being Shakespeare can explain his *Hamlet*, "looking before and after"—backward to an old, outworn legend and forgotten superstitions; forward to the subtleties, complexities, world-pain—yes, and something of the science—of the late nineteenth century. For not only is the author modified by his age; in turn he modifies his age and the ages yet to come.

In a word, the way to teach the history of English literature is to teach it sanely.

DISCUSSION

PRINCIPAL ALVIN A. KEMPTON, Brigham Academy, Bakersfield, Vt.: In my discussion of Professor Axson's paper, I shall take up only three points,—namely: the why, when, and where of the subject.

Why should the study of the history of English literature receive attention? Briefly we may say that the sequence of events in the broader lines of history is better understood by the perusal of this particular chain of literary events. Also an intensive study of the lives and characters of the "literary lights" of all time gives us a connected perspective for the better appreciation of the productions of the men and of various eras of activity.

When and where should the study of the history of English literature take place?

I take issue with Professor Axson in regard to these points. Superintendent Stone mentioned yesterday that only 12 per cent. of those who entered our secondary schools went to any higher institution. In other words, 88 per cent. of our secondary students do not go to college. If the study of the history of English literature is deferred until then, seven-eights of our students will never have the privilege of studying the subject, except in a cursory and disconnected way while

reading literature. If the subject is so valuable to the proper appreciation of men and their thoughts (and I admit its full value), why should not the 88 per cent. profit by its study instead of deferring it until the second year of the college course?

The high school has often been called the “people’s college,” and with reason. The large majority of our pupils finish their school life in the secondary school, and for that reason I firmly believe that the history of English literature ought to be included among the secondary-school subjects.

This study might be taken up more intensely in the college course, and with profit even to those who have been over the ground in preparatory school.

I argue in favor of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” but not against further study of the history of literature at a time when the mind of the student may be more fully developed.